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Spit [John 9]

Peter Hiett @ The Sanctuary Downtown
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Isaiah 40:22 (The Message) –

God sits high above the round ball of earth; the people look like mere ants.

Video Clip – Antz

[An ant is lying down on an ant couch in a therapy session]

Ant (Z): *I always feel uncomfortable around crowds. I mean it, I-I have this fear of enclosed spaces. I-I-I, everything makes me feel trapped all the time. My father was basically a drone like I've said, and, you know, the guy flew away when I was just a larva. And my job, don't get me started on it, 'cause it really annoys me. I was not cut out to be a worker, I'll tell you right now. I-I-I feel physically inadequate. I, I, my whole life I've never, I've never been able to lift more than ten times my own body weight, and, and when you get down to it, handling dirt is, you know, ewwww, is not my idea of a rewarding career. It's this whole gung-ho super-organism thing that, that, that I - you know, I can't get, I try but I can't get it. I mean you know, what is it, I'm supposed to do everything for the colony, and, and what about my needs? What about me? I mean, I gotta believe there's someplace out there that's better than this! Otherwise, I'll just curl up in a larval position and weep! The whole system makes me feel - insignificant!*

Therapist: *Excellent! You've made a real break through!*

Ant (Z): *I have?*

Therapist: *Yes. You are insignificant!*

Ant (Z): *I am?*

That's the beginning of a great movie, and that's Z talking to his therapist at the beginning of Antz. He's an ant searching for significant, but he is insignificant. His therapist reveals that he only becomes significant by adding himself to the whole – the colony is significant. That is, "Z, it's not about you." Therefore, Z's choice doesn't matter ... only the colony's choice matters.

But we're Americans, and not ants, and so we're trained to say, "Hey we're individuals, and this is a democracy, so every vote counts. And yet, think about it: The popular vote is simply the biggest colony. So then the Good is simply what most people do, and thus we become slaves to fashion – just one more person dressing, talking, and thinking like all the rest.

But we're Christians, and not just Americans, and not just ants. So we're trained to say, "We're different. We follow the Lord. So we follow Him, kind of like this:

Video Clip – *Life of Brian*

[A crowd is shouting]

Brian: *Oh please, please, please, listen! I've got one or two things to say.*

Crowd: *Tell us! Tell us both of them.*

Brian: *Look, you've got it all wrong! You don't need to follow me! You don't need to follow anybody! You've got to think for yourselves! You're all individuals!*

Crowd: *(In unison) Yes! We're all individuals.*

Brian: *You're all different!*

Crowd: *Yes! We're all different.*

Lone male: *I'm not.*

Crowd: *Shhhhhh!*

Brian: *You all have got to work it out for yourselves.*

Crowd: *Yes! We've got to work it out for ourselves.*

Brian: *Exactly!*

Crowd: *Tell us more!*

Brian: *No! That's the point! Don't let anyone tell you what to do!*

That's Brian in *Monty Python's Life of Brian*. It's a rather sacrilegious movie, and a rather insightful movie. The religious crowd has mistaken Brian for the Messiah. He tells them that they "don't need to follow anyone." And that's not true. But he does tell them that they're "all individuals." And that is true.

"You must think it out for yourselves ... you're all individuals!" And they respond in perfect unison: "Yes, we're all individuals ... we must think it out for ourselves."

That sounds familiar to me:

"Yes, I have decided to follow Jesus. I'm different. I have a personal relationship with Jesus... as long as a large group of friends have a personal relationship with Jesus and are different with me."

As a kid, I didn't really fit in at school, but I fit in at church. My dad was the pastor, and I fit in, because we could all be different together, and look down on the kids at school who were just the same.

In Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Myth of the Grand Inquisitor*, Jesus comes to Seville, Spain, during the Inquisition. The Grand Inquisitor locks Jesus in the dungeon, and for about 15 pages, rails at him for destroying the Church's work.

He screams at Christ, sitting in silence,

"Don't you get it? ... The great concern of these miserable creatures is not that every individual should find something to worship; that he personally considers worthy of worship; but that they should find something ... which they can all worship in common. It is essential that it should be in common ... There is nothing more alluring to an than freedom of conscience, but neither is there anything more agonizing ... [Thus] the need to find someone to worship, someone who can relieve him of the burden of conscience, thus enabling him finally to unite into a harmonious ant hill where there are no dissenting voices..."

In the end, the Grand Inquisitor falls silent, longing for Christ to say something. Instead, Jesus suddenly goes over to the old priest, and kisses him gently on his old, bloodless lips. And that is His only answer.

According to Scripture, men aren't free, but Jesus came to make us free. And the old priest is right – we don't want it. And so we abdicate our choice to the colony, to the popular vote, to the religious authorities. We abdicate our faith to them. We think truth, meaning, and significance is found in numbers, so what we worship in common is more important than what we worship. Psychological studies bear this out in some shocking ways – we're more concerned with being normal than being true.

Therefore, "I want to be an individual ... but only if I'm an individual just like everybody else."

What if we only **think** we're individuals?

Because our society tells us that we're individuals,
But we're not?

What if we only **think** we have a personal relationship with Jesus

Because our church tells us that we do,
But we don't?

What if our faith isn't in Jesus, but in the colony, the popular vote, the moral majority, the religious authority, or the crowd that chants "Hosanna," and then "Crucify Him!"?

What if?

How would we know?

How might we be cured?

Just wondering.

Let's look at John 9. We began preaching it last week.

[John 9]

As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

Having said these things, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man's eyes with the mud and said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing.

That's beautiful. Can you imagine how this man felt?

Siloam, or "Sent," is the pool from which the priest would draw the water for the ritual celebration in the temple during the feast, when all Israel would celebrate God's provision of water and life on their wilderness journey.

This is Jerusalem at the Feast of Tabernacles. The crowd would number hundreds of thousands, and every day this man would sit in their midst and beg. Imagine that: So terribly alone in an immense crowd ...

Perhaps everyone is alone in a crowd, because a crowd is just numbers. A crowd values uniformity, not individuality. So in a crowd you're surrounded by actors, all acting just the same. As Kierkegaard writes, "A crowd in its very concept is the untruth." And so everyone in a crowd is alone, yet few know that they're alone. Cause just look around ... "It's a crowd!"

Well, this fellow must've felt profoundly alone in that crowd, and yet he's dependent on that crowd – they are his livelihood, his life. He's alone in the crowd, but dependent on the crowd; and so he's resentful of the crowd. He's de-humanized by the crowd. A crowd finds its security and significance in uniformity and numbers. This man is numbered among them, but he's not like them.

He's blind, so they judge him and blame him, and exclude him even as they include him. Everybody sees him and nobody sees him. Everybody knows him and no one knows him.

Can you imagine how he felt?
Perhaps that's how you've felt ... even at church.
Especially at church.

Can you imagine how awful he felt?
And now, what does he need?

Answer: Church... Spit and some mud rubbed on his face.

Jesus spits in the dust, makes mud (or clay), puts it in the blind man's eyes, and then tells this poor blind man to walk through the crowds of Jerusalem with the spit and mud on his face, all the way to the pool called "Sent."

Why spit?

Bible scholars really don't know. But maybe your heart knows, 'cause you know spit.

In 1975, Brennan Manning was a raging alcoholic lying in a gutter in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. I remember him sharing about a little kid that ran up to look at him. His mother grabbed him and covered his eyes, saying, "Don't look at that filth ... pure filth." And then she spat on him.
How humiliating.

Mother Teresa wrote, "We learn humility through accepting humiliation cheerfully."

One day when a parishioner wouldn't stop gushing about his greatness, Martin Lloyd Jones said, "Madam, if you could look into my heart, you would spit on my face." He accepted humiliation.

Humility comes through humiliation. But once you are humble, you can't be humiliated. You're free.

In Scripture, to be spat upon is the ultimate form of public derision.

In Scripture, no one is as spat-upon as Jesus.

The Bible points it out in several places, Old Testament and New.

Isaiah 50:6 – He was spat on and mocked by the soldiers of the Jewish High Priest and by the soldiers of the Roman Governor... by the crowd. He was spat upon and yet He humbled Himself. He was free. Jesus was spat upon, and three times Jesus heals people with spit. Isn't that weird? Spit is humiliating, and spit is intimate.

Imagine this fellow: Everyone sees him and no one touches him. You've seen this type on the 16th Street Mall. I wonder how often they get hugged, or even touched by people like you or me.

So he sits there in darkness, alone in a crowd... and he hears a voice – the Light of the World. Instead of the condemnation that he expects, he hears the Teacher say (to those who had despised him), "This man is blind so that the works of God might be displayed in him." Then he hears the Teacher bend down, spit, and make clay... and then he feels that clay in the spot of his deepest shame: his wound, his eyes.

That's intimate.

Humiliating, yet intimate.

Like a sloppy, wet kiss – full of child’s saliva mixed with macaroni and cheese.

The Maasai tribe in East Africa has a tradition – that is, a sacrament. When a father seeks to forgive a son who’s been excluded from the tribe, he goes to a hillside alone and prays that the Creator would grant him, “The spittle of forgiveness.” If it’s granted, he calls his son and anoints him in public with the spittle of forgiveness, and then all celebrate, for the son who was lost has been found. The spittle of mercy has covered the wound of disobedience.

Forgiveness is humiliating and intimate – its grace.
Humiliating, intimate, and creative – like spit.

In high school, we called it “swapping spit.” It was a sloppy, wet kiss. It was my favorite thing to do, and it proved to be rather creative – it led to marriage and four children. And now, don’t be offended at me – I didn’t invent biology. God did. Human life is the result of people exchanging body fluid.

In the beginning, God bent down, made clay, and breathed into it, making man (*Adam*). From earliest times, the church fathers spoke of Jesus’ action in John 9 as a picture of Creation. And Jesus is the Breath, the Word, the Seed.

So spit is humility, intimacy, creation ... and here, its isolation. And this is what’s especially confusing for us – the guy’s already isolated, and Jesus isolates him even more. It’s like Jesus goes out of his way to break every social taboo, every rule of the crowd... at least in this situation.

What He did was forbidden on several counts, not by the Law of God, but by the Law of the religious establishment:

It was forbidden to make clay on the Sabbath.

It was forbidden to care for any ailment on the Sabbath that could be cared for the next day.

It was even forbidden to anoint eyes with “fasting spittle.” Apparently, some ancients believed spit from a person who was fasting had magical powers... and so of course it was forbidden for Jews. Even more, the Old Testament (Lev. 15:8) reveals that contamination is spread through spit, and Jesus was contaminated with something.

Well, you see, Jesus could’ve healed this guy however He wanted, but in this case, He chose spit. Maybe He always chooses spit, in some form.

So, the *Logos*, the Reason, the Light of the World spits and wipes mud on this poor fellow’s face, telling him to walk through the crowd and wash in the pool called “Sent.” It’s like Jesus is trying to make this fellow more of an outcast than he already is. He’ll receive his sight, but it will cost whatever reputation he has left.

Well, the man does it, and he sees, but he's like the only one who sees... the only one who's sane – him and Jesus. And everyone else is insane. What happens next is like a Monty Python sketch.

(Read in a British accent)

The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar were saying, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" Some said, "It is he." Others said, "No, but he is like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." So they said to him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud and anointed my eyes and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' So I went and washed and received my sight." They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. So the Pharisees again asked him how he had received his sight. And he said to them, "He put mud on my eyes and I washed, and I see." Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?" And there was a division among them. So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him, since he has opened your eyes?" He said, "He is a prophet."

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight, until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, "Is this son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son and that he was born blind. But how he now sees we do not know, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." (His parents said these Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue.) Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind and said to him, "Give glory to God. We know that this man is a sinner." He answered, "Whether he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" And they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from."

The man answered, "Why, this is an amazing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." They answered him, "You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?" And they cast him out. (They excommunicated him.)

I need to read this like a Monty Python sketch to help me laugh. Otherwise, I think I'd cry. I've been the Pharisee, and I think I've been the blind man who could see. I grew up in the church, and so I pretty much had God figured out. He worked through flannel graphs, properly-organized Presbyterian Committees, and the Westminster Confession of Faith.

So, hippie communes, Baptists, Pentecostals, Roman Catholics, and stuff like holy spit were all highly suspect. And yet, whenever I'd judge some group or some means to be inferior, God seemed to use them to bless me, and use them just to tick me off. I've been the religious crowd.

And I think I've been the blind man who could see. As a young man, I watched my father get excommunicated from the mainline Presbyterian church. It happened at Central Pres, where we used to meet. And I still couldn't really explain it to you – it was like ... insane– just insane.

And as you know, about 3 years ago, I was excommunicated from the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, and my home church. People will ask me to explain it, and at some point I always seem to stop and say, "I'm sorry... but I don't know if I can explain it. It was insane."

I was asked to confess two things I couldn't confess... that I never could've confessed in good conscience:

1. That it "pleased God" to not call some of mankind, but to order them to dishonor and wrath... and
2. That some people could not be saved.

What made it feel insane was that so few seemed willing to dialogue, examine Scripture in the Light, or listen to reason. And I found no one even willing to publicly confess what I was asked to confess. And when I'd press colleagues at my home church, they'd say, "Well, it's not this ... it's something else." But they couldn't describe the "something else."

Some said, "You're controlling," but couldn't tell me what I had controlled. Ironically, I was so terrified of seeming "controlling" that I tried to control the situation by being totally not controlling, which gave others control and manifested my real sin... and that is my desperation or everyone to like me all the time—especially the members of my tribe, the Church.

For years, I'd been the golden boy of my denomination, with the fastest-growing church and famous authors who'd stand up and say things like, "Week in and week out, Peter is the best Bible teacher I've ever heard." But now I was backed into a corner, and I had to choose: My addiction to the glory of men, OR what I saw – the glory of God ... Grace. My tribe, my colony, my people, my family ... or the Truth... and the truth in me.

And now, this is the strangest part of the whole thing: Through circumstances, prophecy, and visions, I realized that God had set me up. It's like I was part of the crowd, yet alone in

the crowd–dependent on the crowd, and so resentful of the crowd. And Jesus found me, spit in the dust, rubbed mud in my face (right in my wound – my sin – my addiction to approval), and then told me to walk right through the crowd and wash in the pool called “Sent.”

The crowd had given an insane diagnosis, and yet it was God’s perfect prescription.

Aposunagogas – Excommunication.

Aposunagogas – It’s a word that only appears in the Gospel of John. It means, “Kicked out of the synagogue... the Assembly.” It was awful for me, and I’m so sad to say, awful for many of you.

Aposunagogas – Stripped naked, spit upon, and alone.

Ever been there? Excommunicated by your people, your tribe, your family, your friends, your colony? And then you ask God, “What’s wrong?” And then you realize that He put the mud on your face and He led you to this place. And that doesn’t mean you’re necessarily right – it’s pretty much guaranteed that somewhere you’re very wrong. Perhaps it’s seeking the glory of men, like me. It might be alcoholism, or adultery, or whatever. But once you surrender to Jesus, you realize that He’s led you – even through your failures – to this place.

Aposunagogas – Cast out, isolated, and alone.

Why? Why? Why?

[**next verse**]

Jesus heard that they had cast him out, and having found him he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”

“Who do you say the Son of Man is?

Do you believe?

Do you believe?

Not the scribes and Pharisees ... not Rome ... not the PCUSA or the EPC... not your colony, your tribe, your synagogue... Do you believe?

I want to know, Peter... not who do men say that I am. Peter, who do YOU say I am?”

This man was cast out, and that’s where Jesus found him.

Was Jesus ever cast out? Yes ... cast out, stripped naked, covered in spit, and nailed to the tree. That’s where we found Him ... OR ... He found us.

Hebrews 13:13 – *Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach He endured.*” That’s where we meet Him.

Remember Brennan Manning, spit upon in the gutter in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida? He had been a priest, and now he lay alone in a ditch. In one of his books, He writes: “Probably the

moment in my own life when I was closest to the Truth – Who is Jesus Christ – was the experience of being a hopeless derelict in the gutter in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida.”

So Jesus asks, “Who do you say I am, Brennan?” And he’ll answer, “My Savior, who saved me, who met me in the gutter in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida; who met me at His Cross.”

In verse 35, Jesus said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”

He answered, “And who is he, sir, that I may believe in Him?” Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and it is he who is speaking to you.” He said, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped him. Jesus said, “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.” Some of the Pharisees near him heard these things, and said to him, “Are we also blind?” Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, ‘We see,’ your guilt remains.”

The Pharisees were blind to the Truth, because they sought the glory of the crowd. “The crowd is indeed untruth,” writes Kierkegaard. The crowd is Insanity: It is people shaping each other in each other’s image, until all are just the same, and all are just as lost... worshiping each other rather than the truth, who is Jesus.

Yet, God loves the crowd... or I should say, the people in the crowd. And so, what does He do?

Aposunagogas. John 16:2 – He says to His disciples, “They will kick you out of the synagogues (the Assemblies).” It’s God’s plan. He isolates His disciples, He strips them of their addictions to the approval of men, and there He reveals His Love, uniquely there in the wounds.

He makes them individuals, uniquely in His image, and sends them back to the crowd – not as a product of the crowd, not as one more cog in the wheel, not as one more worker in the colony... He sends them back as a blessing, bearing a unique testimony of Grace.

God is not interested in simply building a bigger synagogue, a bigger assembly. He’s building His Church – *ekklessia*. It means, “people called out.” And so, He calls you out, makes you an individual, and then sends you back to make you His body: Each part unique, but bound in one body, one flesh, and one blood ... not an assembly of one-celled organisms, like an amoeba or a fungus... but a body.

He does it over and over again in Scripture:

Joseph is rejected by his brothers so he can return and bless his brothers.

Moses is rejected by Israel so he can return and bless Israel.

David is rejected by his kingdom so he can write the Psalm and bless the world.

Peter casts himself out in rejection, and then returns to build the Church.

Paul is blinded and sent into the desert to return and bless the nations.

From the ditch, God called Brennan to return and bless the Church, and our church.

Even in the movie *Antz*, Z the ant becomes an outcast, but that makes him an individual, and he returns and saves the colony. In the end, he says, “I got it all back, but now I choose it.”

God will find a way to isolate you from the crowd, so that you’re not one more uniform, mindless product of the crowd. He’ll get you alone, so you’ll choose Him alone – choose Love alone – and then return and choose to love the people in the crowd.

This church needs you to be alone with God, ‘cause we don’t need one more worker, or one more drone. We don’t need one more Justin or Frances or Peter ... we need **You**, and only Jesus knows who you are, and only He can tell you.

Jesus is rejected, so He can bless you, and with you, return and bless others. God will get you alone to make you unique, in order to bless the whole body. And God will get you alone to bless Himself, and to bless you with Himself. Jesus will get you alone, so that He can be alone with you.

In high school, we all dressed the same, talked the same, and tried to act the same. Yet there was one girl I always tried to get alone, like a lion isolates its prey from the herd. I always tried to get her alone, so I could be alone with her, and swap sloppy, wet kisses – kisses that made me who I am, made her who she is, and created 4 children... created life.

Like a lion isolates its prey from the herd, I isolated her and devoured her with kisses. Well, Jesus is a lion. Jesus “Goes over to the old man and kisses Him gently on his old bloodless lips. And that is his only answer... The kiss glows in the old man’s heart,” writes Dostoyevski. I wonder if the kiss glowed in Judas’s heart?

Well, Jesus anoints the blind man with mud and spit. He anoints him at the place of his wound. Then he finds him and asks him, “Do you believe?” The man cries, “Lord, I believe!” and worships. He worships. The Greek verb is a cognate: *pros kuneo*... from *pros* meaning “toward”, and *kuneo*, meaning “kiss.”

I think the blind man covered Jesus the Christ with sloppy, wet kisses, and Jesus ate them up like a lion consumes its prey. The disciples weren’t kissing him, the scribes and Pharisees weren’t kissing him, Pilate and Herod certainly weren’t kissing him, but the blind man was kissing him... for the blind man saw him and knew him – Jesus, his Savior.

And those kisses were the works of God displayed in him. Why the blindness? Why the humiliation? Why the isolation? Why the spit and the mud applied to the wound? All for those kisses.

We say, “It’s not about you,” and yet God makes it all about you, so you’ll be all about him, and give him those kisses... unique kisses... your kisses... your worship.

In his book, *Mortal Lessons*, Richard Selzer, M.D., writes:

"I stand by the bed where a young woman lies, her face postoperative, her mouth twisted in palsy, clownish. A tiny twig of the facial nerve, the one to the muscles of her mouth, has been severed. She will be thus from now on. The surgeon had followed with religious fervor the curve of her flesh; I promise you that. Nevertheless, to remove the tumor in her cheek, I had to cut the little nerve.

Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamplight, isolated from me, private. Who are they, I ask myself, he and this wry mouth I have made, who gaze at and touch each other so generously, greedily? The young woman speaks.

"Will my mouth always be like this?" she asks.
"Yes," I say, "It will. It is because the nerve was cut."
She nods and is silent. But the young man smiles.
"I like it," he says, "It's kind of cute."

All at once I *know* who he is. I understand and I lower my gaze. One is not bold in an encounter with a god. Unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth, and I am so close I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate to hers, to show her that their kiss still works."

On the cross, our Lord's body was bent and twisted to show us that the kiss still works. But more than that, to show you that your kiss still works.

On the cross, He bears your sin.
On the cross, He kisses your particular wound with Grace... the spittle of Forgiveness.
He covers your disobedience with His mercy, and in that way, makes you in His image, and yet unique in all creation.

So do you feel cast out, isolated, and alone?
Let Jesus kiss you there, and you are the envy of the angel. You will be of indispensable significance to God, and to all of us.

[Communion]

[Benediction]